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CENTRAL AMERICA AND ITS RESOURCES.

BY AUDLEY GOSLING, BRITISH MINISTER TO CENTRAL AMERICA.

VERY little is known of the pre-historic conditions of the "Land of the Quetzal," beyond the fact that its primitive dwellers were nomad Indians, probably, but not certainly, of Asiatic origin; and it is perhaps mainly due to recent archæological researches, conducted with so much patience and ability by Mr. Alfred Mandeslay in Yucatan and Northeastern Guatemala, that a discovery of much interest has been made, pointing to the conclusion that the aborigines boasted of a civilization superior and anterior to that of the Aztecs of Montezuma's day. The country, discovered by Columbus in 1502, was fifteen years later made a captaincy-general by Charles I., and up to the year 1821, when the Spanish dominion was overthrown, proved one of the richest appanages of the crown of Spain. Between 1821 and 1839, the five states formed a confederation, which was dissolved in the latter year.

To the general reader few countries are so completely *terra incognita* as Central America, comprising the Republics of Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador, whose total area is about 175,000 English square miles: the largest, and most sparsely populated, Nicaragua, containing 49,500 and El Salvador, the smallest, 7,225. The several populations, of which forty per cent. are Indians, are as follows: Costa Rica 250,000, Guatemala 1,500,000, Honduras 420,000, Nicaragua 310,000 and El Salvador 670,000, making a total of 3,150,000. El Salvador is the most populous, counting 89 inhabitants to the square mile. These countries, situate between 8° and 21° 30' N. and 77° and 94° W., include Yucatan and the Mosquito Reserve. Geographically, both British Honduras to the north and the State of Pan-

ama, south of Costa Rica, extending southwards to the Isthmus of Panama, form part of Central America; and should the union of the five Republics be consummated, efforts would probably be made to acquire from Colombia the State of Panama, or a portion of it. Central American Union is to-day occupying the attention of certain of the states, especially Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, and were the opposition to the scheme which has always been offered by Costa Rica withdrawn, its realization might be hastened.

When completed the Inter-Oceanic Railway, "*Ferro-Carril al Norte*," in course of construction across Guatemala, of which upwards of seventy miles are now open to traffic, to connect San José, the Pacific port of that Republic and Puerto Barrios on the Atlantic (which will bring Guatemala City within five days of New York), and should the Nicaragua Canal and various other contemplated means of internal communication be carried out, a great influx of foreigners, chiefly Americans and Germans, will probably follow, whose influence and example will hardly fail to promote the development and material advancement of these countries so lavishly endowed by nature. Guatemala City, situated amidst grand surroundings at an altitude of over 5,000 feet above sea level, will certainly become a favorite winter residence for Americans who now seek sunshine in the islands of the Greater and Lesser Antilles. Its climate may be described as that of perennial spring and during the warmest months, March, April and May, the shade temperature seldom reaches 75° Fahrenheit, and the nights are always cool, necessitating the same bed covering as would be used in spring in either London or New York. There is, perhaps, no more beautiful site in the New World for a capital than Guatemala City, but before it can lay claim to become a health-resort—which it could assuredly do—an improved system of drainage and a supply of pure water must be introduced; still even in its present state it is far from unhealthy. The population may be put down at 70,000, and there is ample space and facilities for one ten times its size. The mail and telegraph services throughout the Republic are admirably administered: postal matter, although carried by mule trains from the capital to Port Livingston on the Atlantic, a journey of six days, reaches New York in eleven days; commercial and general news from Europe and the United States is regularly re-

ceived and published the same day by the Central and South American Telegraph Company, via Galveston and Salina Cruz in Mexico. The city boasts of excellent markets, better furnished than many of those in the principal towns of Spain; the stores, too, are well supplied, and hotel accommodation, though hardly adequate for existing requirements, is fairly good. As is the case in the other Central-American capitals, Guatemala is an expensive place of residence, more so on the whole than New York or Paris, nor can it be said that one gets one's money's worth.

The Constitutions of these Republics are nearly analogous, and are modelled much after that of the United States. The President, elected for six years, represents the executive power, while the Legislature is vested in a National Assembly, whose members, elected by universal suffrage, sit for four years. The form of government is "Constitutional and Democratic." The Ministers hold the portfolios of Foreign Affairs, War, Finance and Public Credit, Justice, Public Works and Public Instruction. Under General Ruffino Barrios, the uncle of the present President, popular education made considerable strides, and there are now no less than 14,000 educational establishments, public and private, in Guatemala, counting an aggregate of 150,000 pupils of both sexes. Throughout Central America instruction is free and compulsory.

During the past fifteen years a large foreign population has settled in these countries, principally Americans, Germans, Italians and Swiss, drawn thither by the high prices commanded, by what is commonly called "Costa Rica," under which denomination all the varieties of coffee grown in Central America are known to the consumer. Fortunes in this branch of agriculture have been rapidly made, owing to the extraordinary rise in prices, which have steadily advanced from \$8 to \$28 and upwards per quintal (\$1 currency equal to about 50 cents gold); and until internal peace is restored in the Brazils there does not appear any likelihood of a fall in coffee prices. To give some idea of the national wealth of Central America, it may be said that the value of the exports and imports of the five States amounted last year approximately to £6,000,000, the lion's share, about £2,500,000, falling to Guatemala, whose export and import duties alone for the month of January of the current year amounted in round

numbers to £100,000. Coffee culture, which was introduced into Central America by the Jesuit Fathers in the year 1770, and was entirely unknown there prior to that date, has now assumed extraordinary proportions, especially in Guatemala, Costa Rica and El Salvador, where the population is denser and means of communication better and more general than in the sister Republics. It is estimated that this year's coffee crop in Guatemala, which forms nine-tenths of its total exports, will reach fully 57,000,000 pounds, valued approximately at £3,000,000. The finest brands are shipped to Hamburg, London, Havre and Cherbourg, the inferior qualities finding a ready market in the United States. The three model "*Fincas*"—coffee plantations—in Central America, are said to be "La Libertad" and "Mercedes," in Guatemala, belonging respectively to General Barrillas, late President of that Republic, and Messrs. Hockmeyer, Germans, and that belonging to the Messrs. Vaughan, Englishmen, near the City of Granada, Nicaragua. With regard to the latter State, should the contemplated canal and the Inter-Oceanic Railway, connecting its Pacific and Atlantic coasts, be carried out, Nicaragua will offer a wide field to foreign enterprise, not only on account of its agricultural resources, which are but little developed, but in view of its great mineral wealth. It was recently said by an English mining expert of long practical experience, "that the day was not distant when Nicaragua would astonish the mining world as a great gold-producing country." In this, as in the other Republics, Costa Rica and El Salvador excepted, the great drawback to agriculture and to industries in general is the lack of sufficient labor; but this difficulty is in no wise insurmountable, as has been proved quite recently in Guatemala, where Japanese labor has been successfully introduced. A few years ago some hundreds of Gilbert Islanders with their families were imported with only partial success, as neither the local conditions nor climate appeared to agree with them, and the death rate among them was very heavy. In Costa Rica, West Indian negroes have for many years past shown themselves to be admirably adapted for field labor, but they are mostly confined to that Republic.

The soil throughout Central America is wonderfully rich, and produces to perfection nearly all the cereals and plants of commercial value known to the New and Old Worlds. Wheat, barley,

oats, maize and European vegetables of every variety grow luxuriantly in the temperate and colder zones ; whilst from three thousand feet altitude down to the coast line, indigo, cotton, sugar, cocoa, rice, cochineal, coffee, tobacco, mastic, balsams, tamarinds, peppers, ginger, vanilla, pine-apples, dragons blood, cassia, sarsaparilla and india rubber thrive abundantly. The orange and lemon, exotics introduced by the Spaniards, especially the former, attain to extraordinary excellence, and were care bestowed upon their cultivation, considerable and very lucrative business could be done in this branch of agriculture. The *Palma Christi* (castor-oil tree), indigenous to Central America, grows wild throughout the country, and in such extraordinary quantity that its oil might be successfully extracted at a cost which would admit of its use for ordinary lubricating purposes. The forests, many of which are primeval, abound in woods of great hardness and exquisite beauty, and include mahogany, cedar, logwood and various other dye-woods.

Of minerals, gold, silver, copper, iron, lead, zinc and other ores are plentiful, and if mining ventures in certain of the Central American States have not as a rule proved remunerative, failure is to be attributed to mismanagement, and, in many cases, to a lack of honesty on the part of the promoters.

The chief exports include coffee, cocoa, indigo, cochineal, sarsaparilla, balsams, mahogany, cedar, dye-woods, hides, tortoise shell, cattle and bullion. The principal imports are cotton, linen, dry goods of all classes, silk fabrics, hardware, cutlery, glass, china, stoneware, jewellery, wine, spirits, beer, mineral and vegetable oils and canned provisions.

The writer of these fragmentary jottings who has travelled much in Central America, strongly recommends to his readers a visit to the beautiful and interesting countries comprised under that name. From New York the journey can be made by way of San Francisco and thence by Pacific Mail steamer to the several ports of call, whence by railway or on mule-back, amid glorious scenery, the capitals can be reached without much difficulty : or another route is from New York by steamer to Colon, and from Panama up the coast by steamer. From Europe the best and most expeditious route is from Southampton by Royal Mail steamer to Colon. In either case the voyage to San José de Guatemala occupies about twenty-four days. The

grand physical beauties of Central America, the richness and variety of its flora and fauna will well repay the traveller for the monotony of the sea voyage, which in nine cases out of ten is attended with smooth seas and the cloudless skies of the tropics. Nowhere on this planet, the island of Java, perhaps, excepted, are volcanoes so numerous and of such varied and eccentric conformation as in Guatemala. The most notable are "Agua" and "Fuego," respectively 13,000 and 12,000 feet in height; during last century the former vomited forth volumes of aqueous matter, beneath which lies buried the old Spanish City of "Ciudad Vieja." "Guatemala la Antigua," the former capital and seat of government under a Spanish viceroy, with its hundreds of fine churches and religious establishments, was upwards of a hundred years ago totally destroyed by earthquakes caused by the sudden and terrible activity of "Fuego." Of recent years seismic disturbance has been of such rare occurrence in Guatemala that houses of two and three stories have replaced the low and substantial structures of former times built to withstand the much dreaded violence of the *tierra mota*. In the Republic of El Salvador a volcano of recent formation, named Izalco, by whose agency the capital, San Salvador, was nearly destroyed in 1873, serves the useful purpose of a beacon for this iron-bound coast on the Pacific. Towards the end of last century the site on which it is situated was a fertile knoll where the Indians cultivated their corn and where the frequent destruction of their crops by fire was attributed to acts of vengeance by neighboring tribes, giving rise to many a free fight in which that deadly weapon, the "*Machete*" played a prominent part; nor was it until a gradual upheaval of the soil was observed, that it occurred to anyone that these supposed acts of incendiarism were due to subterranean ignition. Izalco has now attained an altitude of some 5,000 feet and coasting navigators watch its rapid growth from year to year. Its nocturnal ebullitions form a spectacle of more imposing grandeur than the eruptions of Vesuvius; explosions occur every twelve or fifteen minutes day and night with extraordinary regularity, accompanied by noises likened to the discharge of heavy artillery, followed by the escape of volumes of dense smoke and flame carrying with it hundreds of tons of rock and lava, which on a dark night presents a most weird appearance.

The face of the whole of Central America is intersected with

ravines, locally called "*barrancas*," of great depth, whose creation must have been the result of some terrific natural convulsion hundreds or thousands of years ago, by which the very strata of the rocks was twisted and displaced. Cities surrounded by these barrancas enjoy a singular immunity from the consequences of earthquakes to which they offer an effective impediment. Similar chasms occur from Mexico City southwards, but nowhere are they of such grand proportions as at and around the Guatemalan capital. Taken as a whole, Central America offers a fair field for foreign enterprise. By young men of self-denying and sober habits, possessing a capital of from \$5,000 and a tolerable knowledge of the Spanish language, success either in commerce, agriculture or mining, may be confidently counted upon, but they must avoid all interference in local politics. In these as in all other countries, the foreigner whose character and mode of life command respect will very seldom, if ever, suffer molestation at the hands of the authorities.

The Nicaragua Canal, if once commenced in earnest, will open up the almost inexhaustible resources of that Republic, and the engineering works alone will offer lucrative employment to thousands of foreigners. Its physical difficulties are insignificant compared with those which Lesseps never overcame on the Isthmus of Panama; and perhaps the greatest obstacle to contend with is the silting of the alluvial deposits at the mouth of the San Juan River, the Atlantic entrance to the canal. Its whole length will be 194 English miles, 110 of which are included in the great lake of Nicaragua, 134 feet above sea level, whose total superficial area is 3,668 English square miles. A short cutting will connect this lake with that of Managua, 156 feet above sea level, with a superficial area of 600 English square miles, being fifty miles long by twenty-five miles broad, with an average depth of five fathoms.

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